



Getting together? Voluntary groups in the Baltics

by Nick Haslam

Voluntary membership of associations is an important factor in the generation of social capital in the Baltic States. A 2001 study reveals that associational membership encourages levels of interpersonal trust, the capacity to influence decisions and to take on unselfish obligations. These are important elements in the social cement which binds democratic institutions and beliefs. However a complex range of religious, historical and political factors determine the formation and growth of such associations.

The 24 page report, 'Associational membership and its impact on attitudes and behaviour of people in the Baltic States' by Latvian researcher Inese Ozolina follows similar studies undertaken in the USA and Europe which have compared the levels of civic awareness and political involvement of members and non-members of associational organisations (sports clubs, trade unions, residents' associations etc). In the Baltic States, where democratic institutions and formations are newly emergent after some 50 years of Soviet rule, and where many associations have been formed only in the past 12 years, membership trends can be regarded as valuable indicators of changing social attitudes in this period of transition.

The report was based on questionnaires sent to a random sample of 1000 correspondents in Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. Asking a series of questions which ranged from: 'In general do you think that people try to be helpful, or do they, in general, mostly think of themselves?'; to 'Have you participated in demonstrations or protest meetings in the last five years?' the study brings out wide range of differing attitudes and reactions to the current political and social situation in the three countries.

It found that members of associations in the Baltic States are more likely to have positive attitudes to the present and future socio-political development of their countries than non-members. The study reveals however that citizens of the newly independent countries are less likely to belong to associations and have lower levels of interpersonal trust than their close neighbours in the northern Scandinavian countries. In terms of the changes experienced by the Baltic States following the long era of Soviet rule this is particularly telling, for levels of interpersonal trust are recognised to be strong indicators of the stability of democratic institutions.

Analysis of results between the three countries brings out interesting and complex anomalies which Ozolina has done her best to resolve. Estonia for example had the highest level of associational membership with 30% of the sample stating that they were engaged in some kind of voluntary activity. This is exactly the double of Lithuanian membership levels, where only 15% of correspondents were members of associations. Ozolina intriguingly suggests that the differing dominant religion in each country may be the cause of this disparity. In Estonia the majority of the population are Lutheran and studies in America have shown that Protestant churches favour the formation of clubs, groups and voluntary associations. In Lithuania however, more than 86 % of the total population belong to the Catholic church, which, according to a similar survey carried out in southern Italy, actually discourages the formation of such associations.

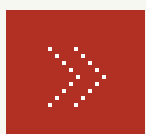
The survey also finds that Estonians are the most trusting of their Baltic neighbours, with 35% of the sample responding positively to the question: "Do you think you can trust most people?" Latvia scored 22% and the Lithuanians came in last at 18%. Ozolina offers no easy explanation for these variations, although it would seem that the differing experiences of each country during the period of Soviet rule would have an important role to play in these results. This might also explain why in Latvia for example, 30% of the sample (and the largest proportion) belong to trade unions while in Estonia, where there was a long tradition of entrepreneurial enterprise before the Soviet occupation, membership of trade unions counted for only 18%.

Most members of associations of all kinds in the Baltic States are under 50 and are of Baltic ethnic origins (determined by language). Not surprisingly Russian speakers tend to be poorly represented in voluntary organisations across all three countries.

Associational members in general valued more highly and knew how to exploit and access more efficiently mass media, local action groups, influential people and political parties. They have more highly developed political skills and will more frequently write personally to official organisations to protest decisions taken by public agencies. A high proportion of members would also have spent more than 12 years in education, with Estonia topping the list at more than 40% of the sample. But unexpectedly when it comes to participating in state elections, trade union activity, or public demonstrations, membership of associations does not play a significant role.

Members were also found to have a wider social circle, to speak about political and social matters and to be more likely to interact with those of differing social backgrounds and lifestyles. Significantly, they tend also to have a more critical view of their country's experience under Soviet rule, and to have an optimistic view of the future.

The study recognises that voluntary associations are still a developing sector in the Baltic States, and that they do not as yet play as important a role in influencing attitudes as they do elsewhere. The three countries are still in a period of transition and a rational and active attitude toward democratic society will take time to replace the ideology of previous regimes. Further and wider ranging studies are vital, Ozolina suggests, to evaluate the impact and to facilitate the potential of voluntary associations to generate social capital for the Baltic States of the future.



Article referred to

Inese Ozolina, 'Associational membership and its impact on attitudes and behaviour of people in the Baltic States,' Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2001
<http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00001165/>